

Whittington, Illinois

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Changes can come to a small community quickly, even dramatically. Whittington, Illinois, in Franklin County, is an example of such changes. Until 1894 it was mostly a farming area which rural churches and one-room schools characterized.

Early settlers were attracted to the Whittington area because of plentiful game and abundant water. Jacob Winemiller, the first person to own land in Whittington, came in 1848. In his memoir he wrote of homing pigeons, groves of oak trees, and farmers who walked their livestock to market, often all the way to St. Louis. Suddenly this tranquility changed. The railroad gave birth to Whittington, like many of the neighboring communities. In 1894 the Chicago and Eastern Illinois (C&EI) railroad came through and with it came dramatic changes.

Whittington suddenly became an important cattle loading point and the center of a timber area producing railroad pilings and crossties. Businesses began to pop up. Some of the first businesses were a hotel, a variety of stores, sawmill, barbershop, blacksmith shop, and a funeral home. A livery stable provided transportation for students to nearby Ewing College. The students traveled the first cement road in southern Illinois. Soon a bank developed and was one of only three in the county to survive the Great Depression. Today it still prospers; in fact, it now has branches at Benton and Sesser.

Another dramatic change came in 1919 when a steam engine waited by the lumberyard. The engine blew a spark on the dry wooden roof. At first the flame was

small, but when the train backed up and squirted steam on it, the fire consumed the entire roof. It quickly spread. Most of the business district east of the railroad burned to the ground. The lumberyard was later rebuilt, but most businesses were not.

Once again improvement promised new life. This occurred when state highway 37 came through. Route 37 barely touched the outer edge of the Whittington community, but it stimulated new businesses like gas stations and restaurants. Citizens were certain that the paved road would bring new life and growth. Actually all it did was make it easier for locals to shop in bigger communities. Further, bus service soon replaced the passenger trains. Trucks make freight hauling more convenient than that of the railroad and its once busy depot. Actually only one business besides the bank and funeral home survived, and it was actually on the highway and not in the center of town. Burton's Cafe, famous for its white pie, continues after 57 years.

If you look at Whittington today you see pleasant, mostly small homes surrounded by huge farm fields. These homes have electricity, indoor plumbing, and running water; luxuries that seem so normal today were not always around. Until the early 1960s the people of Whittington depended on well water and cisterns. In many summers these cisterns and wells dried up. Water was scarce. In the early Sixties the federal government got involved. They provided the funding to dam the Big Muddy River, forming nearby Rend Lake. This provided running water to many of the homes of Whittington and other communities. Power plants farther south provided electricity.

In addition to water, Rend Lake provides recreational and tourist businesses. It also brings business for restaurants and spread the fame of Burton's white pie. On the other hand, Rend Lake took nearly half the land and population that supported the consolidated

elementary school. In 1974 it closed and merged with nearby Ewing Northern Grade School.

Still, changes occur. Rend Lake supplies water. A modern system provides sanitation. Nearby Rend Lake College and Big Muddy Prison bring employment opportunities. The Rend Lake Artisan Shop causes people to pull off Interstate 57 and others stay to enjoy the twenty-seven-hole-golf course.

I love my community, Whittington, Illinois. Its quiet neighborliness, sense of security, and peaceful demeanor make it a special place to grow up. Whittington has a rich history. It is different from the surrounding communities, yet very much like them. Changes came from outside factors and people had to adjust. Now its future is tied to new opportunities including the promise of additional recreational projects connected to the lake. [From Ewing-Northern 1993 Eighth Grade Class, *A History of Whittington, Illinois*; David Goss interview of Elizabeth Britton, Nov. 10, 1992; David Goss interview of Laverne and Harold Winemiller, Apr. 16, 1993; David Goss interview of Lee Herbert and Billie Winemiller, July 22, 1992; Joseph Jurich, *This is Franklin County*; Billie Winemille, "The Old 'C&EI'"; William Winemiller, "Looking Backward," *The Daily American*, Oct. 1934.]